

IDENTITIES SIDE BY SIDE

THE PRACTICE OF FAITH IN DENOMINATIONALLY MIXED MARRIAGES¹

Abstract: The study examines denominationally mixed marriages in five villages in the vicinity of Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfîntu Gheorghe, Romania) and how the practice of faith is manifested there. Centuries-old legal practices related to weddings, christenings, funerals, church attendance and everyday life are still alive and are shaped by the policy of the Roman Catholic church and by ethnic and denominational identity. Families' practice of faith can be grouped into four types: equal rights, assimilative, patriarchal and Catholic.

Keywords: denomination, multiconfessionality, marriage, christening, funeral, church attendance, diversity, conflicts and their resolutions, Hungarians, Romanians

In one of his studies Miklós Tomka, sociologist of religion stated that "in the course of European and American development the church was far from being the all-dominant reality that had earlier been supposed. Recurring irreligiousness, religious revivals, denominational battles and temporary periods of peace succeeded each other over the centuries."²

In the 20th and early 21st century we can observe one such process of turning away from religion: perhaps we can speak not of general irreligiousness but rather of a complete transformation in the quality of religion. Luckmann called this qualitative change "the privatisation of religion",³ but we could also call it the "domestication" of religious life. In 1995, discussing the changes following the Romanian revolution, Zoltán A. Bíró and Endre Túros also noted the loss of ground in the role of religion, concluding that the formalisation of the relationship between church and society was continuing and would become increasingly striking in the following decade. At the same time they also indicated that the

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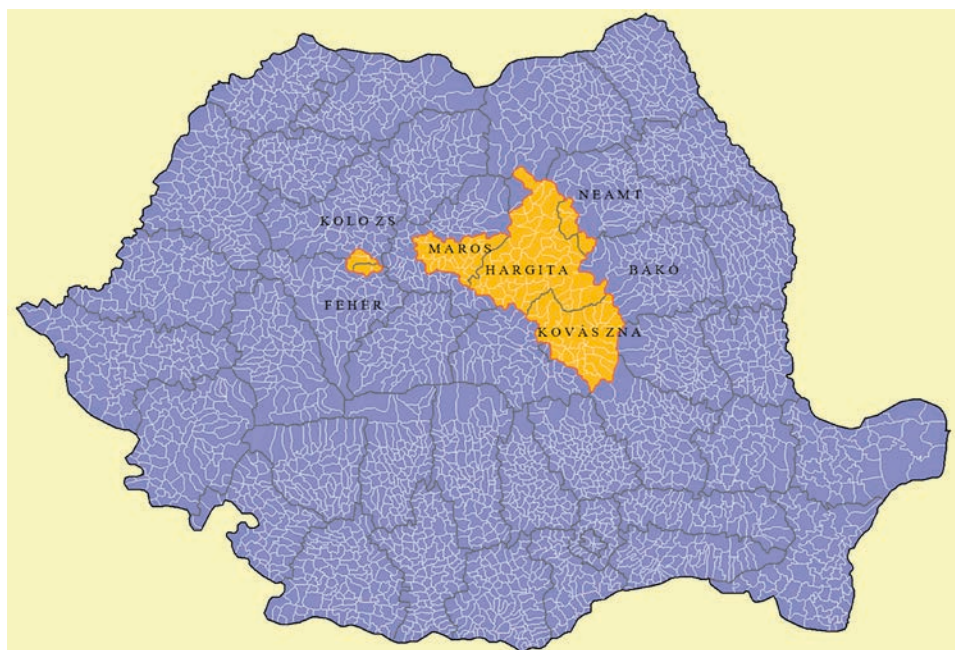
² TOMKA s.d. 2.

³ LUCKMANN s.d.

more rigid attitude towards the Church as an institution did not mean a complete turning away from religion, only the radical transformation of religious life.⁴

It is precisely the changes in religious life following the Romanian revolution (1989) that indicate that this process was not only a function of the measures banning religion under communism, it was at the same time also a concomitant of the alienating, money-oriented way of life. The individualism continuously reshaping the world schematised all forms of communication, it reduced the occasions when people living in the same settlement met, and transformed both their festive days and weekdays. In fact the crisis can be felt most intensively not in the life of the churches but in the communities.

This hypothesis was the point of departure for my research when I examined: what is left of religion as a socially determined set of norms? How do families, the micro-units of society, live their religious life? I concentrated mainly on the forms of religious practice within denominationally mixed marriages. The basic method used in my fieldwork was in-depth interviews. I spoke at length with 26 denominationally mixed families in five settlements.⁵ They signalled the main directions



The Székelyföld region within the territory of present-day Romania
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tört_Székelyfő\(hun\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tört_Székelyfő(hun).png)

4 BÍRÓ A. – TÚROS 2005. 108.

5 The area in which the research was carried out has been part of Romania only since 1920, earlier it was part of the territory defending the eastern borders of Hungary. The population of the area is still 80% Hungarian, the name of the current public administration unit is Covasna county. The five settlements where more intensive research was conducted were: Árkos/Arkus, Kálnok/Calnic, Sepsikőrőspatak/Valea Crișului, Kökös/Chinchiș, Sepsikilyén/Chilieni.

that are the major factors of denominationality in the awareness of people today, the most important forms of the manifestation of identity. Many further brief conversations added nuances to this basic picture, mainly helping to understand the process and to assess frequencies. Members of the units of micro society that still operate religious life today, families and their members, spoke about the religious patterns, their socialisation, and the centuries-old conflict management solutions used by multiconfessional societies, their timeliness today, the agreements between marriage partners on religious practice, and the directions perceived by ordinary people with a denominational mindset. My interlocutors themselves indicated the thematic groups of my analysis. These conversations also clearly indicated the cognitive context in which the ordinary person thinks about religion. Villagers in the Sepsiszek micro-region do not see religion and denominationality as an ideological-dogmatic system, but rather as behaviour patterns, or even as socio-cultural constructs that determine the directions of their everyday actions.⁶

We know that in many villages of the region two or three denominations were present in almost equal proportions already in the 18th century⁷ and – with the exception of the Greek Catholics who have disappeared – they have survived right up to the present.⁸

The practice of faith in rites

Religion – as Jürgen Habermas also noted – is closely linked to ritual practice, what distinguishes religious discourse from theological discourse is that it is rooted in the cult, while the latter is separate from ritual practice.⁹ Nowadays it is no longer obligatory for the individual to participate in these ritual occasions. Marriages can be contracted without church rites, just as the church initiation of young children (christening) or the officiation of priests at burials are no longer a constraint. The fact that the people of the Sepsiszek area still turn to the church in the milestones of their lives is an indication that they do not accept the full secularisation of life.

In denominationally mixed families, the ways in which the members participate in church rites are determined on the one hand by individual decisions and on the other by family or community norms. The choice of church for marriage and christening and of cemetery for burial only appears to be independent of community practice. Centuries-old customs and old laws try to ensure that individual interests or denominational struggles do not disturb the sacrality of the rite.

6 Cf. ANTONEN 2004. 8.

7 For a brief summary of the religious history of the Háromszék region see: CSIFÓ 1899.

8 See VARGA 2001. The Greek Catholic denomination was banned in Romania in 1949, after which most of its followers were integrated into the Roman Catholic or the Orthodox church.

9 HABERMAS 2007. 127.

1) *Choice of partner, wedding*

By the second half of the 19th century bitter denominational conflicts had entirely disappeared from this region, the denominations lived side by side and there were increasing examples of coexistence within families. Records of births, marriages and deaths show that in three-denominational Kőkös (Unitarian, Calvinist, Orthodox) by the second half of the 19th century the Orthodox had lost their ethnic identity and had become Hungarianised. In this village with a very mixed population parents tolerated denominationally mixed marriages that accounted for 44% of all marriages. Within the norms followed in Kőkös there were cases in families with a stronger denominational identity where the young man's parents tried to persuade the girl to change to their denomination. Denominational endogamy had less force also in Árkos and Kálnok. This can be seen in the fact that many mixed marriages can be found already in the early records. In a few predominantly Calvinist zones the smaller Unitarian community was already on the path of natural assimilation. This was found for example in Sepsikillyén: at the end of the 19th century there was still a filial in Sepsikillyén of the parent church community in Sepsiszentgyörgy, with a substantial Unitarian population. However, since the area around the village (Szotyor/Coşeni, Uzon/Ozun, Illyefalva/Ilieni, Sepsiszentgyörgy) was predominantly Calvinist, the church community began a process of rapid assimilation; today only 17 persons in this village regard themselves as Unitarians. Árkos was able to preserve its Unitarian majority because it had established a system of marriage ties linked not to neighbouring Sepsiszentgyörgy, but to Bölön/Belin and Nagyajta/Aita Mare, villages with a Unitarian majority on the other side of the mountain, and to Sepsikőröspatak and Kálnok with substantial Unitarian populations.

When we examine mixed marriage families today and their behaviour patterns, it is striking to find that the identity is not of equal intensity in a Calvinist-Unitarian, compared to a Roman Catholic-Unitarian or Orthodox-Calvinist marriage. One woman living in a mixed denominational marriage¹⁰ did not feel her own state to be a mixed marriage at all, even though she was Unitarian and her husband Calvinist:

“What would be mixed when a Unitarian and a Calvinist marry?
The two religions are almost the same.”

In Sepsikőröspatak where the majority are Roman Catholics it was only the older women who mentioned that their parents were not happy with the choice of a partner from a different denomination.¹¹ Today mixed marriages are regarded as most delicate in cases where the denominational differences also coincide with ethnic differences. Marriages with Orthodox ethnic Romanians are still received

¹⁰ VE, female, b. 1956, Árkos, Unitarian.

¹¹ Szl, female, b. 1941, Sepsikőröspatak, Calvinist.

with intolerance by the community: for a population in an ethnic minority situation the strengthening of ethnocentrism and maintaining an awareness of dissociation from those with a different language is obviously the most important way to struggle against assimilation. The families concerned speak with shame of their failure to persuade the young people and are very resentful if the young couple decide to marry in the Orthodox church. Marriages between followers of the more recent minor churches and sects and members of the historical churches are also felt to be problematic: in these cases the member of the minor church generally assimilates the partner belonging to a historical church, in an effort to increase their own legitimacy. This can be clearly observed in Sepsikőröspatak for example, where there are quite a large number of Jehovah's Witnesses and members of the Cheerful Sunday group known as *clappers*. When I asked about families where, for example, one partner was a Cheerful Sunday follower and the other a Catholic they were not able to cite a single case because members of the traditional church left their denomination already during the period of courtship.

2) *The wedding venue*

An examination of the marriage records for the Háromszék region in the late 19th to early 20th century shows that it was practically a general rule among Hungarians that the couple went to the church of the bride's denomination for the marriage ceremony. In Kálnok for example, a combined examination of the Calvinist and Unitarian registry records shows that 89% of marriage ceremonies were held in the bride's church; of the 70 weddings examined, only 8 were held in the groom's church.¹² According to the combined data of the Sepsikillyén Unitarian and Calvinist churches, 97.3% of marriage ceremonies were held in the bride's church.¹³ The records examined show different ratios in a few church communities at the end of the 19th century: in Kökös in the case of the Unitarian church, 42% of mixed marriages were contracted in the groom's church and only 58% in the bride's church. Since the registry records of the Kökös Calvinist denomination both before and after this period indicate that the custom of "bride's priest marries" was followed, it seems likely that this difference was due not to a departure from the village's custom but rather to the presence and service of a more intolerant priest or one spreading a stronger denominational identity.¹⁴

The marriage ceremony was held in the groom's church mainly in cases where the groom stubbornly insisted on his own religion. As a woman in Kálnok recalled her wedding:

"I am Calvinist, yes, but we were married only in the Unitarian church. [...] We did not for a moment consider marrying anywhere

12 Sepsiszentgyörgy State Archive, F. 105/185, F. 105/188.

13 Sepsiszentgyörgy State Archive, F. 105/240, F. 105/242.

14 Sepsiszentgyörgy State Archive, F. 105/233, F. 105/235.

else, and my son too was christened there. It was taken for granted that he would be Unitarian. My husband is a staunch Unitarian, he is a church warden too.”¹⁵

They also married in the groom’s church if the bride was a Roman Catholic but was remarrying after a divorce. In this case the change of the wedding venue was determined by the Catholic church’s rejection.¹⁶ Couples married according to the groom’s religion also in cases where the girl’s parents for some reason “bore a grudge against the priest”¹⁷ or if there was no priest in the village at the time of the wedding in the church to which the bride belonged.¹⁸ In Kökös Hungarianised followers of the Orthodox religion rarely married partners of their own denomination, and in cases of mixed marriages generally went to the Hungarian church. In this case, holding the wedding ceremony in the groom’s church was a clear sign of assimilation:

“There are 10–15 families who speak Hungarian and are Orthodox. It was very rare for a Romanian to marry a Romanian, around one girl out of three married an Orthodox. If it was a mixed marriage it was usually held in the Hungarian church. After all, they associated with Hungarians, so they went to a Hungarian church too.”¹⁹

The case of the Unitarians of Sepsikillyén was also an indication of assimilation: since there were far more Calvinists in the village, almost without exception Unitarians or Roman Catholics were married in the Calvinist church.

The introduction of the Catholic “*reverzális*” (pledge) brought a radical change in the marriage customs. They began to oblige brides belonging to a Protestant denomination to visit the husband’s church after the wedding in their own church and to go through the marriage ceremony there too, undertaking an obligation to have their children christened as Roman Catholics. In the strongly Catholic Kőröspatak the question of marriage in both churches and the pledge was still a cause of disputes in the sixties.²⁰ Since it was not the Calvinist who refused the pledge but the Catholic who was punished by the church (they could not take communion), the marriage system was transformed under external pressure: either they went to both churches, or they married only in the Catholic church. In the seventies the most frequent solution was to marry in both churches, and this model also radically transformed the Protestant marriage customs. Because a big and lavish wedding satisfied the demands of the partners for outward show, the two-wedding model contributed to the disintegration of the earlier custom.

15 CS, female, b. 1954, Kálnok, Calvinist.

16 KPS, female, b. 1941, Sepsikőröspatak, Calvinist.

17 SBE, female, b. 1922, Kálnok, Unitarian.

18 SBE, female, b. 1922, Kálnok, Unitarian.

19 AFM, female, b. 1955, Kökös, Orthodox.

20 SZI, female, b. 1941, Sepsikőröspatak, Calvinist.

2) *The choice of the children's religion*

One of the biggest tests of strength in mixed marriages was the birth of children and the subsequent christening rite. It was perhaps in order to avoid conflicts over the choice of the children's religion that the old custom produced its own variant: it was the old rule that daughters followed their mother's religion and sons the father's. This norm was generally applied for example in Árkos: Between 1892 and 1899 the local Calvinist church registered children from 11 mixed marriages, and they were all christened according to the denomination of the parent of their gender. The Unitarian church registered children from 24 mixed marriages between 1884 and 1889²¹, of which 23 followed the religion of the parent of the same gender.²² In the case of the Calvinists in Kökös, between 1886 and 1893 the children of 21 mixed marriages were christened, 20 according to the gender of the parent.²³

The continued existence of the norm can still be clearly observed today. This norm proclaimed the principle of equality, so that neither side should feel excluded, or that their denomination is suppressed. When the older generation see that a child has been born, they make the young people aware that *this is the church's order*, and the young couple have to accept it. Arbitrarily violating the rule is regarded as *incorrect* behaviour because it upsets the accustomed order and can lead to chaos and arguments.

It is worth stressing that the majority of my informants – not by chance – said that children *inherit* the religion of the parent of the same gender. This statement indicates that denominational ties are not a voluntary choice, they are regarded by the community as a canonised endowment. Children are *born into* a denomination. This norm is also related to the order of inheritance of assets: families still have a well regulated seating order in the churches which means that christening into another denomination could endanger the inheritance and maintenance of seating places. In this way the inheritance of denomination *by gender* is closely linked to the inheritance strategies for assets. If a family *drops out* of a church, it loses its power over the seating places; this is regarded as a loss of social prestige since the place where a family sits in the church is also a sign showing the status it merits as a native within the given community. *Christening outside the accepted order* still causes serious trauma. Anyone who is unable to succeed in having a child of their own gender christened in their own religion is regarded as *weak*. Exceptions to the norm are frequent mainly in villages where the denomination concerned does not have a church, in which case it is regarded as natural that a tiny infant is not taken to a distant village simply to receive the *inherited* religion it has been allocated.

²¹ It was not possible to follow the christening customs in the later Unitarian records because they no longer listed the religion of the parents, only their names.

²² Sepsiszentgyörgy State Archive, F. 105/60, F. 105/63.

²³ I was unable to analyse the christening data in the Unitarian records for Kökös because the parents' denomination was entered only haphazardly. Sepsiszentgyörgy State Archive, F. 105/233.

Christening the children in one denomination was explained by the desire for common agreement. In a few more patriarchal families the father sometimes insisted that the children follow his religion. Although nowadays village communities for the most part regard the choice of denomination as the internal affair of families in which no one but the family has a say, it is nevertheless a fact that the older people call such men *big-headed*²⁴, meaning that even today they do not accept excessive aggressiveness. Christening children to *the same denomination* chosen in advance was a tactic that could be clearly observed among educated village families. In many cases one of the reasons for this was not a well-chosen strategy but the fact that during the communist period teachers did not dare to have their children openly christened, they entrusted this task to the grandparents.²⁵ It more often happened among younger families that the denomination of the partner with the stronger identity was chosen for children of both genders. The growing number of cases where both children follow the wife's religion can perhaps be regarded as a sign of the female emancipation processes. This kind of christening procedure can be observed today, although still in quite limited circles; it is opposed mainly only in families where the men still strongly defend their prestige as head of the family. One of the reasons given for the spread of this practice is that it is the wife who brings up the children. A couple in Kökös had both their son and daughter christened in the Calvinist church because the husband was rarely at home and he thought it more advisable to entrust the children's religious education to his wife.

The pledge (*reverzális*) demanded in Catholic churches also changed this christening model. In villages with a Unitarian or Calvinist majority, the Protestant partner generally considered that their individual pledge did not endanger the existence of the church.²⁶

Demanding the pledge caused internal tensions and conflicts in families with a stronger denominational identity. Families facing such a dilemma elaborated various evasive techniques to carry through their own denominational ideas. The manoeuvres, the search for excuses, finding loopholes in church law indicate that religion has been "privatised". Individuals seeking among the norms try to make them acceptable or to change them. It is precisely such manoeuvres that indicate the existence, reproduction and variation of culture and the fact that these means are being used to shape the revalued rules.

²⁴ SE, female, b. 1922, Kálnok.

²⁵ In conversations with intellectuals my informants indicated that village teachers were under stronger control than their urban colleagues. They were sometimes transferred from one village to another because they had attended church, or they were called into the party committee and threatened. They were given compulsory tasks on Sundays that often had an oppressive effect on the families concerned. As a result, substitute strategies were adopted in place of open declaration of religion: the grandparents or relatives were asked to act in place of the parents. As a result in Romania the communist party system was unable to achieve a complete abandonment of the church because village norms did not approve.

²⁶ RL, female, b. 1955, Gidófalva (now Sepsiköröspatak), Calvinist.

The question of norms and their manipulation is one of the most interesting fields of study in anthropology of law. These studies interpret the life career as being

“no other than the manipulative strategy applied by the members of society against the different, typically contradictory norms. Due to the competence and rationality of the social actors they are aware of the contradictions between the various norms: their freedom of action finds scope in the area of gaps between the different normative systems.”²⁷

The norm of the Catholic pledge that was made compulsory in the villages of the Sepsiszek region gave rise to numerous such techniques of evasion and manipulation. It depends on the competence of the individuals placed in a situation of constraint whether they are able to find the gaps in the legislation that will allow them to preserve intact both their own and their spouse's denominational identity. The ways in which the pledge was evaded live on in the oral tradition of the people of Sepsiszek, in this way individuals can select among the available private practices to try to find the method that best suits them.

“Our children's godmother is Unitarian, her husband is Catholic. They promised to have their child christened as Catholic. And they did, in the Catholic church, so that the husband could take communion. And then they took the child to the Unitarian church and had it baptised there. The last christening is the valid one, isn't it? Well, that's how they did it. They didn't violate the pledge, the child was christened as a Catholic. (Chuckles). [...] There were others who gave the pledge, then violated it. They had a daughter and she followed her mother's religion. You could hear of cases like that too. I don't know, if we had had a daughter, if we would have done the same... The woman who was my witness as my wedding gave a pledge too. Her husband was a Catholic from Újfalu, he gave the pledge, the children all became Catholics, and as they grew up and turned 18 they were christened again elsewhere. I think T too became a Unitarian, and so did Cs. Only B remained a Catholic.”

If the Catholic partner does not *observe* their religion very strictly, the commonest practice is to marry only in the Protestant church, that way they avoid the constraint of giving a pledge. Nowadays the practice of evading the pledge norm is still followed only on an individual level. The individual level of evasion has not yet produced new Protestant norms accepted also at the level of the micro-community. Although in the Erdővidék region the Protestant church developed a *Protestant pledge* as a counter-measure, my interlocutors in the Sepsiszek region do not consider this to be a good solution. They believe that introducing

27 CERUTTI 1995. 154.

such a measure would widen the gap between the denominations, although in other respects they regard it as a natural response.

4) *Death, bell-ringing, funeral*

In most villages of the Sepsiszek region the different denominations have separate cemeteries. Sepsikillyén, for example, one of the very small villages, has Unitarian, Roman Catholic, Calvinist and Orthodox cemeteries. Kökös has separate Orthodox and Calvinist cemeteries, people belonging to other denominations buy grave sites in the “mixed” cemetery. In Kálnok the Calvinist and Unitarian churches also bury their followers in separate places. All three churches in Sepsikőröspatak maintain separate cemeteries. It is rare for a multiconfessional village to have only one cemetery (as is the case in Árkos), here in the past the denominationally strongest families and some of the priests were buried around the church, but more recently all burials are in the single common cemetery.

Village people first obtain basic information on a death from the bell-ringing. The young people no longer know, but their elders always note which bell rings first:

“The bell doesn’t say who died, they know soon enough who has died in the village. [...] For a woman they begin with the little bell, that’s the one they ring first, the second is the big bell, and at the end they ring both bells together. If a man dies, the big bell rings, I know that, the old people (know). But the young ones nowadays don’t.”²⁸

The same symbolism was mentioned in Kökös.²⁹ The local people can decode from the sound of the bell not only whether a woman or a man has died, but among other things also the denomination to which the deceased belonged. As it was recounted in Sepsikőröspatak:

“Another interesting thing here, that is not the custom in all other villages, is that for funerals the bells are rung in all three churches for every Hungarian family – because there are many Gypsies here too. In all three. The ringing is started by the side that has a death, and then the other two churches join in. And the bells toll in all three churches for as long as the funeral lasts.”³⁰

In this way villagers in Kőröspatak decode two pieces of information from the sound of the bells. Firstly, whether a Hungarian or a Gypsy has died (because only the deceased’s own church rings for a Gypsy), and secondly the village

28 SE, female, b. 1922, Kálnok, Unitarian.

29 HÜM, female, b. 1946, Kökös, Calvinist.

30 RL, female, b. 1955, Sepsikőröspatak, Calvinist.

community also knows which church the deceased belonged to from the order in which the bells start ringing. In Kökös villagers can tell from the sound of the bell not only the gender of the deceased, but also whether the person was an Orthodox who has moved into the village or a native of Kökös:

“It used to be that they started ringing in the church the deceased had belonged to. They don’t do that any more either. Nowadays, if someone dies in, say Alszege, the nearest church is the Orthodox one. And they begin ringing there. And as they come up towards the cemetery, first the Calvinist church joins in, then the Unitarian. Yes, it depends on where they lived, not so much on the religion. But for Romanians who have moved in from outside, only the Orthodox church rings its bell.”³¹

In Kálnok too “the church the person belonged to begins.”³² There is a fee for the *bell-ringing*, so in the past in Árkos when the three churches rang their bells it was a sign that the deceased was a *prosperous farmer*,³³ nowadays it indicates denominational distribution within the families:

“It also happens that if there are Unitarians and Catholics in the family, they are sure to have the bell rung in the Catholic church too. For example, just recently, who was it that died? Uncle Sanyi Nagy. He was a Unitarian, and they rang the bell in both churches, in the Catholic too. His daughter-in-law was Catholic, there is a connection that way too.”³⁴

Individual decisions are often also reflected in the choice of cemetery. In rare cases denominational identity appeared to be a stronger bond in the life of a family than the marriage ties; in such cases the husband and wife were buried in separate cemeteries. In Kökös marriage partners were buried in different cemeteries generally in cases where the denominational difference also meant an ethnic difference.

“It happened that partners went separately, the old lady was a Calvinist and the old man a big Romanian. So that’s how they were buried, the man is over there in the Orthodox cemetery, and the wife is here in the Calvinist one. But in general couples are buried in the same place.”³⁵

31 HÜM, female, b. 1946, Kökös, Calvinist.

32 SE, female, b. 1922, Kálnok, Unitarian.

33 BZ, male, b. 1952, Árkos, Calvinist.

34 TKE, female, b. 1956, Árkos, Calvinist.

35 HJ, male, b. 1944, Kökös, Roman Catholic.

The strongest factor that can be observed in decisions regarding the choice of burial place is that the wife is placed beside her husband in death too.³⁶ But the distance between the location of the cemeteries and the mortuary also influenced the decision.

“We live here beside the Orthodox cemetery, why would we go over there to the mixed cemetery?”

– said an Orthodox woman in Kőkös.³⁷

Church attendance

It is still a custom of church attendance today that, if a family are regular churchgoers, the members all go to the church of their own denomination on Sundays. My interlocutors only rarely mentioned people couples going to church together. The most common occasion when they do go together is if their children are to perform in some way, in which case both parents are naturally curious to see their child’s performance.³⁸

Interesting church attendance customs often arose around red-letter days; a few families paid special attention to ensuring that no family member felt lonely at such times. That is why they most often went to church together at that time:

“My grandpa was Unitarian – Grandpa K. Grandpa B was Calvinist. Grandma K was Catholic. My uncle, M.K. was the Unitarian cantor. My mother was Catholic. My father was Calvinist. (...) I always remember, what we did (on major feasts) was that everyone went to their own religion on the first day, my mother to the Catholic, my father and I to the Calvinist, and grandpa went to the Unitarian. On the second day we all went together to my father’s church and on the third day everyone went to the Unitarian. In this way we always visited every church on all the major feasts.”³⁹

In Kálnok too, the older people mentioned going to church together on red-letter days, according to the same system.⁴⁰ In families where the Roman Catholic partner could not take communion because they had refused to give the pledge, they always went to the church of the Protestant partner on major feast days and the Catholic partner took communion in the Protestant church because “there

36 VP, female, b. 1922, Killyén, Unitarian.

37 AFM, female, b. 1955, Kőkös, Orthodox.

38 BBÉ, female, b. 1952, Árkos, Calvinist.

39 BZ, male, Árkos, Calvinist.

40 SE, female, b. 1922, Kálnok, Unitarian.

is only one God”.⁴¹ In mixed Roman Catholic-Protestant marriages, the family went together to the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage feast at Whitsun. Special buses to Somlyó were organised for pilgrims from villages where the number of Catholics had increased, and it often happened that the Protestant partner went with their spouse.⁴²

The celebration of church feast days also means collective family visits to church; in these cases the Protestant partner follows the Catholic partner to church indicating their denominational difference only by not making the sign of the cross as the Catholic partner does. The Unitarian gatherings that have recently become popular evoke the atmosphere of Catholic feasts. The Unitarians of the Sepsiszek and Erdővidék regions favour mainly the Vadas⁴³ Unitarian feast that has been held since the nineties in the vicinity of the villages of Sepsikőröspatak and Középpajta/Aita Medie. The Unitarians go together with their families to these gatherings that have a secular atmosphere.

In addition to red-letter days, prayer weeks are another occasion for collective family attendance. On these occasions all the settlements take care to invite the priests of other denominations. In this way all denominations call on people to attend the prayer weeks, and the priests of different denominations always pay attention to ensuring that two such events are not held at the same time.

Denominationality in everyday life

The ministers somewhat cynically call the Sepsiszek congregations “feast-day congregations” referring to the fact that nowadays people go to church only on major feast days. Religious life has turned inwards, become internalised and out of sight in the houses. The fact that the churches are still full for major feast days, the communities still maintain their churches, people still have their children christened, and funerals held without a priest are still very rare in the Háromszék region shows that there is still religious life.

As church attendance declines, the demand for home blessings increases. In families where one of the couple is a Catholic, or one of the ancestors was a Catholic, having the home blessed around Epiphany is an important question. In many cases the blessing of the house is the only occasion during the year when the priest and the member of the denomination meet in person. In all villages where there are Catholics among the population, having the house blessed is regarded as the *right thing* to do. The Catholic priests also go into houses to bless them where Catholics once lived but are no longer alive. In Árkos for example, there is a man who no longer has any Catholic living in his house but every year he

41 HJ, male, Kökös, b. 1944, Roman Catholic.

42 SZI, female, b. 1941, Sepsikőröspatak, Calvinist.

43 Mount Vadas in the vicinity of these villages is the highest peak in the region; since the 1990s the Unitarians have held their main annual assembly here.

has the house blessed. When families knew that the priest was coming to bless the house – they left the gate wide open to signal that they were expecting the priest and they declared their intention to the ministrants who went ahead of the priest. The letters GMB chalked on many doors show that this case is not unique: in denominationally mixed villages even young people who, in spite of their Catholic faith practically never go to church, have their houses blessed. “The priest goes everywhere, even where there are mixed marriages” – said an informant in Kálnok too.⁴⁴

It is not only the GMB sign on the door that shows outsiders the denomination of the people who live in the house, but also the presence of church symbols. Catholics put up sacred images, crosses and rosaries to indicate to outsiders the denominational identity of those who live in the house. Calvinists and Unitarians mainly display the calendars of their denomination to signal their religious allegiance. In some homes the Unitarian and Calvinist, or the Unitarian and Catholic calendars side by side convincingly demonstrate that it is not to show the order of the days that they are placed there.



Roman Catholic and Calvinist use of calendars, Kökös, 2012.

44 DT, female, b. 1941, Kálnok, Unitarian at birth, now Calvinist.

It is mainly women who play the main role in home furnishing and the women in denominationally mixed marriages take special care to ensure that elements of their own identification do not violate the religious identity of their partner. They try to counterbalance the proliferation of sacred images with cards commemorating the Unitarian gatherings, or by displaying confirmation certificates. The house is no longer a place where prayer meetings are held but a functional living space in which symbols of other identities very often appear together with those of denominational identity. The calendar or confirmation certificate placed beside the red, white and green ribbons, the football group photos, or the wedding photos indicate the environment into which denominationality is integrated. The scattered display of symbols is a sign that the inhabitants of the house have “privatised” their faith, regarding it as a natural part of their own lives. It is as much their own as the wedding photo, the memories from childhood or collections of objects that can be regarded as a hobby. But the fact that they make these symbols visible means that people still embrace their religious ties.



The privatisation of denominational symbols. Árkos, 2013.

Religious culture is multi-layered: its presence can also be observed in food customs. In quite a few places the Friday fast is still observed in Catholic-Protestant mixed families.

“I always keep the Friday fast. Sometimes he (the Unitarian husband) does too, but less often. During Lent too he only fasts on Fridays. I eat on Easter Friday too, but only toast, tea, nothing fatty, boiled potatoes, things like that.”⁴⁵

The celebration of Easter is especially interesting in Orthodox–Roman Catholic or Orthodox–Protestant marriages. Given that the “Romanian” and the “Hungarian” Easter rarely fall on the same date because of the use of different calendars, they celebrate both Easters. In Kökös Orthodox-Calvinist families observe a strict fast on Easter Friday, and celebrate both Easters by slaughtering a lamb and baking a milk-loaf.

Summing up and conclusions

My study perhaps shows that in the Sepsiszkék area of Transylvania religion and denominationality are not merely learnt dogmas, but rather are made up of cultural patterns and attachments that also function in an increasingly secularised world. These patterns are sometimes communal – as in the case of religious rites – and sometimes “privatised”, determining and directing the individual lives of families and micro-communities, life within the family and the home.

Among families of mixed denomination a number of clearly identifiable models or types can be distinguished – depending on the strength of the identity:

a., Equal rights type – this type had the most representatives in Sepsiszkék – as the examples cited showed – because the local society, its written and unwritten laws produced and asserted the cultural patterns of this type over the centuries.

b., Assimilative type – in this case one of the partners voluntarily renounces their own denominational identity, and the borders of their own denomination entirely disappear for them. This type is found mainly in villages where one denomination is in strong decline and is disappearing while the other congregation is growing stronger.

c., Patriarchal type – this is intertwined to a certain extent with the assimilative type. The father decides all directions of denominationality, generally imposing the dominance of his own denomination.

d., Catholic type – the directions of denominationality are not determined within the family as an internal affair of the family concerned, but under external influence, following the considerations of Catholic church policy.

⁴⁵ SE, female, Sepsikillyén, b. 1939, Roman Catholic.

Most of the patterns of coexistence operating in the multiconfessional environment have centuries-old roots and can be traced back to unwritten laws. Individuals learnt the norms of denominational coexistence from early childhood. They learnt where marriages were to be held, in which religion children were to be christened, what bells were to be rung and how to mourn relatives, and how to strengthen their own denominational identity with the help of symbols. According to the old community belief, the denomination is *inherited*, just like assets, the name or ethnic identity. At the same time a certain hierarchy of identities arose within the cultural system: the national identity was always more important and of a higher order than the denominational identity.

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